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Edited by
Varsha Joshi

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Institute of Rajasthan Studies, Jaipur



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The Graves of History or the Metaphor of the Hidden Pir

Dominique-Sila Khan

To say that Rajasthan is a colourful and picturesque region may be a well-worn cliché but if, leaving aside the striking aspect of dresses and ornaments, one looks at all the cultural and religious traditions of that region, this may also be a metaphor referring to its composite culture. However, for about one century various factors have gradually undermined this richness and diversity. In a world where most people feel an increasing pressure to define themselves along two main categories, 'Hindu' and 'Muslim', perceived as water-tight compartments, eternally antagonistic blocs beyond which whatever exists is negligible, the image of a 'polychrome' Rajasthan is in danger of being replaced by a much duller, black and white picture. This picture does not only imply the existence of an irremediable fault-line, but also amounts to denying the extraordinary diversity that still exists within each of the broad categories broadly labelled 'Hinduism' and 'Islam'.

This phenomenon, coupled with various attempts at distorting history to make it fit within the narrow framework of extremist ideologies of all kinds, has already had all sorts of dreadful consequences; it has even started to affect oral culture,

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as new myths, made available to a wider audience through cheap hagiographic literature, religious and political propaganda (Horstmann 1995) tend to displace earlier versions that tell different stories. In this way, an impressive number of local traditions have been literally buried, vanishing from the visible landscape of Rajasthan.

To start with, the example of the famous Diggy Kalyanji shrine, a well-known pilgrimage centre situated south of Jaipur, near Malpura, on the Tonk road, will serve to illustrate our purpose.

Going Underground

About twenty years ago the famous shrine of Diggy Kalyanji in Rajasthan was still regarded as a centre of Vaishnava Tantric worship (centered on the cult of the *chaturvyuha* aspects of Vishnu) as well as a religious shared space. During the annual *mela* the devotees participated in some 'orgiastic' fertility rites which were connected with the Tantric tradition of the temple: pilgrims of both sexes, of all castes and faiths danced and mixed freely, while women lifted their skirts in front of the sanctum to ask for the boon of a male child.

The actual place of worship was a modest underground temple located under an old curvilinear *shikhara* in the 'classical' style which had, at the back, a sculpture meant to represent the four aspects of Krishna as described in the Sanskrit Pancharatna texts: Vasudeva, Krishna, Pradiyumna and Anuraddha. There, devotees worshipped both an image of Vishnu and the grave of a Sufi Pir. In the eighties, however, the underground shrine was closed and a new temple exclusively dedicated to Krishna (in his Brahmanical, non-Tantric aspect) was built in front of the dilapidated *shikhara*. The trust decided that the worship of the Pir should be discontinued as it was a non-Hindu practice. Fresh booklets were printed that explained the popularity of the place by a few miracles typical of Hindu



hagiography. The main story was that of a king of Diggy who, afflicted with leprosy, had miraculously been cured at this very spot. In this literature no mention was made of the former Tantric rituals nor of the existence of a Muslim grave¹.

When I reached the small town of Diggy with a person who had visited the place twenty years ago, finding no trace of the Pir my companion was puzzled and wondered at the striking transformation which had taken place. When we asked about the existence of an underground shrine the Brahmin priests pretended to be surprised. What we had just seen after having climbed the flight of steps that led to the temple was the only place of worship: the sanctum with Krishna's *murti*, some subsidiary shrines and a Shiva *lingam* surrounded by a rectangular railing. We went out of the temple and looked around till we reached a locked iron-gate apparently leading to an underground hall. Returning to the temple, we asked another priest to tell us what was kept in that locked chamber. He replied, with feigned indifference and a slight touch of contempt:

It is not important, just a godam to keep tools and discarded objects...

Later on, we went to the house of an old Muslim Teli (oil-monger) who lived in the vicinity of the temple and asked her if she knew anything about the vanished Pir.

Indeed... I have seen it myself, all of us have seen it, many years ago, when there was no 'real' temple, just the old ruined *shikhara* and the underground shrine with the grave of the Pir and some image of Vishnu Bhagavan...

Who was this Pir ? When did he die ?

I don't know...the *mazar* may be very old... and as to the name of the Pir, I think it was something like 'Kalyan Pir' or 'Kalam Pir'... I am not sure...well, let me remember and ask my husband when he comes back from...

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She had not finished her sentence when one of the Brahman *pujaris* suddenly peeped into the room. The effect was immediate: the old woman stopped short, and pretending to have a bad headache, kindly requested us to come 'later on', although she was now sure that nothing more could be told, so why should we trouble ourselves in coming at all...

It did not take long before we understood that we would learn nothing more in the sacred city of Diggy: everywhere a heavy silence reigned and there was something like a vague fear in the atmosphere...not long ago there had been communal riots in the area and curfew had been imposed on the nearby town of Malpura. This is where we chose to direct our steps.

We immediately went to the Muslim area where we asked to talk to one of the 'elders'. Understanding the purpose of our visit some men gathered around us and attempted to share with us their knowledge of the past. Nobody agreed as to who the Pir was, neither could they tell us his name and origin, but all had seen his grave in the underground shrine, side by side with Vishnu's image. They confirmed that, earlier, many Hindus, and more particularly untouchables such as the Meghvals, did also worship the Sufi saint. And yet, nobody seemed to remember who was doing the seva at that time. The underground chamber had been locked by order of the newly formed Deva Sthan Trust and the whole sacred complex had lost its 'syncretistic' nature: needless to say, Muslims had ceased to visit the shrine. At this juncture, we had very little hope to get more information, when two men who had arrived in between but had remained silent throughout the whole discussion, suddenly intervened:

Oh... said the older one, you did not tell them the story of the disasters that occurred after the Pir was locked...

The story was the following: after the cult of the Muslim saint ceased to be performed, a number of accidents took place in the city of Diggy: among others there was a sudden power cut the cause of which could not be found. Electricians realpatidar.com and engineers were helpless and the whole town remained plunged in



darkness for a long period. Some Hindu devotees suggested that this mysterious event could be explained by the wrath of the Pir whose cult had been abandoned. Eventually, people decided to resume the regular worship (with offering of *chadars*, incense and roses), after which the electricity immediately came back; however the underground chamber remained closed and the cult was done in secret twice a day by a Brahman family.

The tradition is still continued, said the younger man, let me tell you my own story...and a very recent one ! It may be just one year ago, when I was invited to renovate the underground hall of Diggy Kalyanji. I have not told you, but I am a painter and a very close friend of one of the *pujaris* son...so I went there to lay a fresh coat of painting on the walls. I was made to enter the place secretly, together with my Hindu friend. And I saw it, I saw the *mazar* of the Pir and the Brahman's son told me that worship was still done regularly by his father or his uncle... I saw it all...the grave, the green *chadar*, the roses...

I immediately remembered the Shiva Lingam which was surrounded by a railing.

Where is that grave located? I asked.

Did you see the lingam in the temple? Do you understand? It is just under it and that rectangular space with the marble floor and the railing has exactly the same shape and size as that of the *mazar*...

It was clear. The Hindu object of worship had been erected exactly above the tomb of the Pir so that innocent (and ignorant) devotees should not unwittingly tread the sacred floor above the Pir's grave.

In a sense, by worshipping Shiva one also worshipped the Pir...

One could think that the underground story of Diggy Kalyanji is something unique, a rare occurrence, an exception that confirms the rule. But this is not the case: many similar examples could be given. We will give here only a few.



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The legend of the Amber goddess Shila Devi is well-known: local people and *Pujaris* often tell the same story about how human sacrifices were abandoned and replaced by animal sacrifices. The slap on the idol's face, allegedly given by the angry father of the boy who was going to be sacrificed on a particular day (or by some other villager) is said to account for the slightly bent position of the Devi's head. But there is another, lesser known version, that has been preserved, among others, by some Muslim artisan communities of Jaipur. While the mother was crying bitterly at the entrance of the shrine, knowing that her only son would soon be sacrificed, a mysterious faqir appeared in front of her and asked the reason of her grief. As soon as he learned what was going to happen the pious dervish offered to take her son's place; but at the last moment, instead of submitting himself to the cruel ritual, the faqir suddenly approached the Devi installed in her sanctum and slapped her face; before the earth swallowed him up, the faqir ordered her to stop accepting human sacrifices and be content with buffaloes and goats.

Impressed by this miracle the king and the priests decided to follow his instructions. The faqir whose mazar is at Amber, at the foot of the fort hill, was hence known as Gebi Pir (the invisible or hidden Pir)². It is easy to see that, in this version the sannyasi or Brahmanical ethos is replaced by the well-known Biblical motive of Isaac/Ishmael's sacrifice. The flavour of the tale, and so its moral, is therefore utterly different: here it is a Muslim holy man who puts an end to a cruel religious practice, whereas the mitigation of non-violence is generally attributed to the ideals of Hindu or Jain renouncer/saints, while violence is said to be a characteristic of Islam.

'Hidden Pirs' or concealed *mazars* do not exist only in Rajasthan – there are to be found everywhere. A noteworthy example is the grave of Mahamati Prannath, one of the founders of the Nijanandi/Pranami faith who is perceived by his followers as Nishkalank Budh Avatar and Akhiri Imam Mehndi. For a



certain number of years the underground tomb which has been observed by older devotees has been dissimulated to the eyes of the visitors, so that a pilgrim entering the sanctum can only see an original copy of the Holy Book, the Qulzam Svarup, covered by a *chadar* and topped by bejewelled crowns (Khan 2002). The explanation that was given to me by one of the sevaks was that too much light emanated from the *samadhi* (as it is currently referred to)³. The radiance would have been unbearable to most people, and only the spiritually advanced ones could see it without fainting or dying. However, what was intriguing was that the priest had used the Arabo-Persian term *nur* to refer to this divine light and the word *Momin* when mentioning the Pranamis. Could one invoke the same reason for concealing under a thick layer of whitewash and, at certain hours, by movable boards, all the Arabic inscriptions engraved on the outer wall of the sacred mausoleum? Actually, many true Pranamis are still proud of them (Sharma 1993: 29) but unfortunately they are now perceived as wrong signals by both Muslim and Hindu fundamentalists.

Let us come back to Rajasthan. There are other ways of hiding the Islamic elements that were once an integral part of some traditions but are currently perceived as disturbing factors or shameful traces of a denied composite heritage.

Blind Faith or Religion without Memory

In the quiet village of Nimaz, near Jaitaran, in Jodhpur district, the most revered sacred spot is an open-air tomb located in a field which belongs to the former ruler, a Rathore Rajput whose small palace is located nearby. Twice a day, in the morning and in the evening, people come to bow in front of the grave, offer to it roses, incense and occasionally *chadars* – sacred draperies that are often green. The shape and orientation of the grave does not leave any doubt as to its identity: it is a Muslim *mazar*. This does not prevent an impressing number of Hindu devotees, particularly women, from flocking to the place where the latter



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generally ask for the boon of a male child. Much more: the Thakur himself (the former Lord of Nimaz) never starts the day, after his morning bath, without making some offering to the small *dargah* (Khan 1997: 87-94).

Who is the saint buried there? Why is the grave located in the precincts of the Thakur's private property, and why is he himself such a staunch devotee? The ex-ruler and the Hindu women I met there gave me the same reply: nobody knew why he had been buried at this very spot. One thing was sure: he was a very powerful Pir and, for this reason, all the villagers, regardless of their religious affiliation, worshipped him. Neither his name nor the date of his demise was known, and he was simply called 'Bapji'. Everybody seemed to be happy with this situation: a peaceful 'non-sectarian' shrine in the Thakur Sahib's compound. Nobody would have ever cared for the Bapji's origin, if the shared space had not suddenly become a disputed structure.

Soon, the villagers were faced with another problem. With the growing popularity of the nameless Pir, an increasing number of miracles were reported till, one day, the local Muslim community expressed the wish to transform the modest, open-air grave into a 'real' *dargah*. They would collect the money to build a boundary wall around it and erect a domed structure over the *mazar*, there would be stalls selling *chadars*, incense, sacred sweets and roses. Undoubtedly, more and more devotees would flock to the shrine from the neighbouring villages, and even from the nearby cities... Besides, it would be administrated by a Sunni Waqf Board Committee. Hindus were worried about this transformation which did not suit their taste and they preferred that the Pir should continue to 'belong' to their Thakur, while Muslims, for another reason, were embarrassed and irritated by this fact.

Actually, the problem which remained to be solved before this grand project could be achieved was the following: the land which was the lawful property of the Thakur should be acquired



from him. It was not the money that was lacking but Mr. Rathore's permission and goodwill. He flatly refused to sell this portion of land, and said he would certainly never do so as long as he lived, even if he was offered crores of rupees.

Apparently, the land was his and...the grave belonged to his ancestor. As a result of a long painstaking inquiry, the legend of the Pir was revealed to us, although we could not trace his name. Unravelling the enigma in the village itself proved to be impossible. Neither Muslims, nor Hindus, neither Brahmans nor Harijans could tell us anything. The silence of the Thakur weighed heavier than the reluctance (or ignorance) of the villagers, as he seemed so sentimentally attached to the Pir who, for some mysterious reason, he said, had chosen to die and be buried in the land that belonged to his forefathers. He regretted not finding any record of the event in the family archives. But it was not surprising after so many centuries.

Instead, the story of the nameless Pir was well-known to the inhabitants of another village, fairly distant from Nimaz, Panditji-ki-dhani, a small hamlet located near Osian. Panditji-ki-dhani is a sacred place of the Nizarpanthis for whom Baba Ramdev or Ramshah Pir is the main guru and God. Towards the end of the 18th century, a famous Rajput saint belonging to the Baba's guru-disciple lineage, Harti Bhatti, chose to spend his last days there. He was buried in the village and his tomb (a *mazar* covered by a *chhatri*) was located in a sacred complex, near the shrine dedicated to Ramdev. This temple is a small pukka structure containing a tiny grave which is the only object of worship. *Chadars*, footprint stones and rag horses are regularly offered to it. Surrounding the shrine a few graves covered by stone *chhatris* are said to contain the mortal remains of Harji Bhatti's descendants and disciples. Harji is one of the leading figures of the Nizarpanth. He is supposed to be the author of a few important poems, among others about Ramdev's life, teachings and miracles. As I have shown in my previous research that the Nizarpanth is a 'Gupti' offshoot of Nizari Ismailism, it is



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not surprising to find in this tradition the same 'syncretistic features as in the Bishnoi, Ai and Jasnath Panths (Khan 1997). In our case, for instance, it will suffice to remark that *mazars* in the Islamic style are attributed to saints bearing Hindu names.

The famous legend told by the *pujaris* of Panditji-ki-dhani is as follows: Sometime during the 18th century, while Harji Bhatti was still living, the chieftain of a far-away village, who suffered from a terrible skin disease, was miraculously cured after a mysterious sadhu appeared to him in a dream. When he described the holy man to his friends and servants everybody recognized Baba Ramdev. Those who had advised the Thakur told him that the Pir of Runicha was no more alive (the Nikalank Avatar, as he was called, had ended his terrestrial life in the 15th century) but that one of his prominent disciples in the guru-disciple lineage was a powerful saint named Harji Bhatti who had settled at Osian. There, in a small hut located in the middle of the jungle, he spent his days meditating and preaching. As soon as he heard this the lord of Nimaz (for it was him) immediately ordered his servants to send a few camel loads of gold and precious stones so that a beautiful shrine dedicated to Ramdev Pir could be built at that very spot. On the outer wall of the present temple there is an inscription that reads, Samvat 1857-1867 pointing to the fact that the structure was built between 1800 and 1810 AD. Nothing more was known about the Thakur, apart from the fact that he embraced Ramdev's Panth and, according to it, was buried in his village in a grave similar to that of Ramdev at Ramdeora (Runicha). If I went there, said my informants, I would be able to see his *samadhi*. All those who have visited Baba Ramdev's main shrine have observed that his grave is built in the Islamic style and often covered with a green *chadar*.

When I reached Nimaz I said that I had come to see the *samadhi* of the Thakur who, at the beginning of the 19th century, had miraculously been cured by Ramdev's grace. I had purposely used the term *samadhi*, knowing that it was currently



used in the Nizarpanthi tradition, as well as among non-sectarian devotees of Ramdev. But surprisingly enough, nobody, including his descendants, seemed to know this story. I was told that there was only one *sadmadhi* in the village, that of a saintly Kumhar (potter), a *chhatri* located somewhere in the village. Curiously, the Thakurs had no *chhatris*.. somewhat bewildered, I asked if there was an important shrine to Ramdev; but there was none... Eventually, a little embarrassed, I said:

No *samadhi* except that of a Kumhar... no temple to Ramdev. Well, is there any kind of sacred mausoleum, tomb or grave in your village?

Indeed... and a very sacred one, although it is only a small open-air grave...but all the villagers worship it, to start with Thakur Sahib himself...

Is it a Hindu grave?

Oh no! It is the mazar of a Muslim Pir everybody calls 'Bapji', not knowing his real name.

I suddenly realised what 'Bapji' meant when I heard a peasant speaking of the present Thakur in an affectionate and respectful way, calling him 'Bapji'.

No doubt, the lord of Nimaz was ashamed although he sincerely worshipped the Pir. He – and maybe already his father and grand-father – had reverted to a more 'orthodox' form of Hinduism, and the Islamic grave had become a source of embarrassment to him. In this case, also, amnesia was a remedy. It was much better to have an anonymous Muslim saint who had granted a boon to one of his forefathers. His grave was not only a sacred symbol that could be revered by all; located within the boundaries of his own land, it was a real blessing for him. Nobody could object to his worshipping a powerful Pir. Aren't the Hindus among the staunchest devotees of Khwaja Sahib of Ajmer? The Muslims of the village were welcome to visit the *mazar* and make offerings to it: this symbol of communal



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harmony was so beautiful. So far so good, there was no harm. But selling his ancestor to the local Sunni Muslims was totally out of question.

A Bicolour Universe

*A different method of concealing one's composite heritage consists in ignoring the presence of a particular structure, that is to say abstaining oneself from mentioning it in books and brochures, and/or avoiding any reference to it in oral communication. Who would tell the visitors and devotees flocking to the Shila Devi shrine about the Gebi Pir? Does anyone, showing to a foreign or an Indian tourist the splendid 18th century Jal Mahal, explain to them that there is a *dargah* inside the palace?⁴ Would a guide point to the Bandarval Darvaza, the main public entrance of the City Palace and say: look, up there... we have a Muslim grave inside the inner chamber of this gate... ? And yet a *khadim* is entrusted with his regular service. I have said above that the image of a colourful Rajasthan was increasingly being replaced by a black and white image. It would be more accurate to speak of a bicolour one.

Other 'clever strategies' are used by communities who wish to pose as 'full-fledged' Hindus or Muslims in order to dissimulate some undesirable features. As religious identities in South Asia come to be viewed more and more as a kind of dichotomy, colours are used among the symbols that serve to demarcate the alleged 'two blocs' which are actually only 'imagined' communities (Freitag 1996: 220): saffron for Hinduism, green for Islam; for instance many local shrines that once looked exactly the same, seen from outside – rough square white-washed structures – started to display saffron and green flags, while the walls of Muslim *dargahs* were often painted green and their otherwise multi-colour *chadars* increasingly replaced by green cloths. However, the rehinduised, 'liminal' – I would rather say crypto-Islamic – shrines had to face another problem: if the leaders of the sects wished to pose as genuine



Hindus, at the same time they were reluctant to discard altogether what had been, for many centuries, their sacred heritage. This is why they resorted to one of the 'clever strategies' I am alluding to: the ornate draperies (*chadar*) covering the holy graves of their founders and spiritual masters, which were usually green, were not removed but hidden by other *chadars* of saffron hue placed on the top.

If colours symbolise and signify, so do words, of course; nothing simpler than avoiding the accusation that a supposedly Hindu place of worship looks like a Muslim shrine, in many cases changing its name is enough. *Dargah* will become *samadhi*, the Pir a Guru, the *murids*, *shishyas*, the term *mukam* can be explained as a corrupted form of *muktidham* (place of salvation) and the etymology of Pirana, the main centre of the Imamshahis of Gujarat and Maharashtra is given as *prerna*, (divine inspiration).

And if this is not sufficient, one can resort to a special kind of make-up: a mouth, a pair of eyes and a nose have been painted on the front part of some of the graves at Ramdeora, so that they may look like idols; a marble slab showing the figure of a horse-rider has been encased on a side of Goga Dev/Guga Pir's grave at Gogamedi. This is why, even if the Muslim priests continue to perform regular worship during their allotted eleven months they complain that 'it is no more a real Muslim *mazar*, because now, there is also a *murti*'.

And finally, when no alternative is found, a last hiding place remains for our Pir. It is, undoubtedly, the safest one; spies and smugglers have always known by instinct that the best way to conceal something is to do it inside one's body. I know a pious Mali who, at home, keeps only the images of Hindu gods. But every Sunday, while going to a neighbouring *dargah* the local Pir is believed to possess him. However, I have observed him closely both at the *dargah* and at his home; there is no conspicuous difference in his voice and attitude whether or not he is in a trance. It is only the language that changes. As soon as



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he start to publicly disclose the Pir inhabiting his body he shift to Urdu and displays a remarkable knowledge of Islamic terminology. Otherwise, he is the same sober, composed, sincere devotee of the one God who has no name. Now, my opinion is that he is not really possessed in the sense of 'spirit possession', but rather that he has found an excellent hideout for the Pir he worships – the Pir who is threatened by the Hindu adherents of a monochrome religion. These persons, luckily, never visit the Muslim shrine where all this happens and if they meet this honest citizen at home or at his work, there can be danger as long as he appears there as a 'perfectly normal Hindu'...

Religious Dissimulation

This leads us to examine the interesting historical phenomenon of religious dissimulation, which has existed in the past in nearly all faiths and all countries; among the Shi'ia it is known as *taqiyya* – a practice which one should try to understand in order to grasp fully the shaping of religious identities in South Asia -- and, in our case, the phenomenon of the 'Hidden Pir'. During a long period, being threatened by the local Sunni rulers, Ismailis practiced *taqiyya*, choosing to conceal their identities under a Sunni Sufi or a Hindu guise. As far as the latter are concerned the phenomenon deserves a particular mention as, for most Ismailis of the Nizari branch who were Hindu converts, it simply meant continuing outwardly their former customs. These people have been later referred to as Guptis.

Let me briefly describe a Gupti shrine belonging to the Imamshahi branch of Nizarism, for instance, the one that existed not long ago in Surat (Gujarat). From one side it looked like an ordinary Brahmanical temple, many a Hindu passer-by entered the shrine, rang the bell and bowed in front of the sacred idol. Only the initiated disciples could see what was behind it: a second, secret entrance, leading to a concealed upper shrine (contrary to the underground *dargah* at Diggy...); this was the



jamat-khana, or prayer hall of the Nizari Ismailis where they traditionally invoke their Imam and their Pirs.

While most Nizari Ismailis gradually went out of concealment after the arrival of their religious leaders, the Aga Khans, in India (either to follow their living Imam or to choose an altogether different identity as Hindu, Sunni or Twelver Shi'i Muslim), a few Satpanthis, as they are called, opted for a very original solution: they chose to remain Guptis, some of them giving, nonetheless their allegiance to the Aga Khan.

For the Guptis who did not follow the Aga Khan, times are difficult. After having been, for centuries, threatened by the Sunni rulers, they now have to face the wrath of the Hindu fundamentalists; the community is fragmented and divided into rival factions (Khan and Moir 2000): there are those who wish to portray their tradition as a 'full-fledged' Hindu one, those who claim that it is a Sunni Sufi movement, and finally, those who swear the Satpanth is originally Twelver Shi'i. In this way, the Hinduised leader of the Gupti community at Pirana, centre of the Imamshahi movement, Karsan Das, is also a 'hidden Pir'. As one of his, equally Gupti, opponent has recalled, he had given up his Muslim name: Pir Karim – a name he was very proud of and which he earlier used as often as the Hindu one. His spiritual master, whose ancestors had chosen a Sunni identity is thus obliged to hide himself: he is an invisible Pir. No 'Hindu Satpanthi' is supposed to know even of his existence although there are still many Guptis – including Karsan Das alias Pir Karim – who secretly accept him as a Pir and clandestinely follow the earlier 'syncretistic' Ismaili rituals. As a result the identity issue of the Imamshahis which is regularly debated at the civil courts has become completely messy; judges and advocates, having no knowledge of the deep enigmas and pitfalls of history, keep repeating the question: is the Satpanth a Hindu or a Muslim sect? And confronted by the impossibility of answering, some courageous Satpanthis have – after a very long period – acknowledged their Nizari Ismaili origin. South Asian



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Nizarism having traditionally been 'syncretistic' permitted them to be Muslims, but 'different Muslims'⁵.

For the Guptis who have accepted the Imam Aga Khan as their religious leader, the issue is totally different, although some of the consequences may appear similar. The Gupti *jamats* of Bhavnagar and Surat have chosen to follow the Aga Khan; however, all of them have not merged into the Khoja mainstream community. They have kept a separate identity and when asked: are you a Hindu or a Muslim, they quietly reply – by customs and jati we are Hindus, by religion Muslims...In doing so, they clearly defy the current binary categories accepted, not only by a majority of people, but also by the civil law and the Constitution... And they seem to repeat the words of a famous Nizari Pir: *caritar hindu andar musulman*...and – the most unluckily, forgotten – or hushed up – utterance of Mahatma Gandhi, the father of secular India who originally belonged to the Pranami tradition: I was born a Hindu... but many people thought we were inherently Muslims... (Ram 1996: 227).

An interesting phenomenon is that, in contemporary India, with the rise of fundamentalist ideals, *taqiyya*, ceasing to be an exclusively Shi'i phenomenon, is practised in various forms by a wide range of Indian communities. Rather than suppressing or destroying altogether their 'liminal' heritage, these communities prefer to keep it in some secret hiding place. We have mainly seen the cases of Hindus concealing their Muslim traditions, but it is necessary to specify that many Muslims are also trying to hide their Hindu heritage. Is it out of shame or out of fear? I would be inclined to think that, in most cases, people do this to avoid trouble. A good definition of the word *taqiyya* is precisely 'precautionary dissimulation' (Daftary 1996: 566).

But, assuming for the sake of argument, that they are more frightened than ashamed, can one speak of a real, conscious 'resistance', 'underground' movement? Probably not; in most cases it is the sanctity of a tradition that prevents the followers of a particular cult or movement to go too far, prompting them to



resort to 'religious dissimulation' rather than take more drastic steps. And this is why there are so many 'Hidden Pirs' in our Rajasthani landscape – Pirs waiting to rise from the dead when better times come.

A last, important question arises at this juncture: is it suitable for the scholar to dig up these 'graves of history'? Should one, metaphorically speaking, lift the saffron drapery in order to reveal the green *chadar* concealed underneath? Will not the results shake and disturb our already shattered social fabric? Opinions may vary, but those who think that preserving the rich composite culture of Rajasthan – and the secular values of India as a whole – is of vital importance will not hesitate a single moment. Under no pretext should we allow our history to be obliterated or distorted for whenever and wherever this has been the case, the rule of terror has replaced freedom of thought and expression.

Notes

1. Gold (1994: 102-104) has explored the contemporary aspects of this cult without being aware of its earlier context. Her remarks are nonetheless interesting from another viewpoint.
2. The *ghayba* or sacred occultation is essentially a Shia concept: 'the word has been used in a technical sense for the condition of anyone who has been withdrawn by God from the eyes of men and whose life during that period of occultation (called his *ghayba*) may be miraculously prolonged' (Daftary 1996: 560). This generally referred to some Shia groups recognising the occultation of a particular Imam who would be the last of his lineage and would return only on the Day of Resurrection. Many Ismaili groups separated from the 'parent body' precisely in this way. It is interesting to note here that, in popular tradition, quite a few Pirs are referred to as '*gebi* Pirs'; in Gujarat Ramdev Pir himself is sometimes called *gebi* Pir and one of the, temple dedicated to him and located not far from Ahmedabad is known as '*Gebi ashram*' in Gutarati, *gebi* means 'hidden', 'invisible' or 'mysterious'.



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3. Some Muslims of Panna who are traditional devotees of Prannath continue to refer to the shrine as *dargah*, a word which is also inscribed on the facade of the mausoleum.
4. Eleven *mazars* (all of them not real graves but *chillas*) are supposed to be located in the underground chambers of the palace; however, I saw only four of them. The main one is situated on the top of one of the square pavillions. Inside a dark chamber there is a tiny *mazar* but also three Hindu *murtis*: the first one represents the Goddess, the second one Bhomiyaji and the third one Balaji. The Muslim *mujavar* or caretaker, who does the seva of both the Hindu and Muslim structures, is regularly possessed by the 'Jalmahalvala Baba' whose *chilla* is installed there. The Baba's name is Gulab Shah, but he is also called Jinnath, as he is believed to control the Jinns who haunt the deserted palace. The annual *urs* is also held in the palace.
5. Another risk is that, by doing so, they could be claimed by the Agakhani Nizari community. Apparently this has occurred towards the end of the 19th and at the beginning of the 20th century. However, nothing forbids an Ismaili group to subsist as an independent branch, as it is the case for Tayyibis or Bohras. But, although this is theoretically possible, the danger in our days is that the followers of a small sect may easily be attracted into the orbit of a larger and more powerful religious community.

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